11 Digital society

Digital transformation, driving efficiency and productivity through the adoption of digital technologies and data utilisation, holds promise for fostering economic activity and competitiveness. This chapter, across four sub-dimensions, assesses the scope and quality of the policy framework and strategies and the implementation and adoption by Albania. The first sub-dimension, access, explores government policies and initiatives to enable network infrastructure investment and broadband services take-up and increase data accessibility. The second, use, delves into the government's plan to implement programmes to develop a user-centric digital government and help businesses achieve a digital transformation. The third, society, assesses whether governments have planned and implemented programmes to reduce the digital divide and create an inclusive society through green digital technologies. The fourth, trust, examines the economies' frameworks and how they are being implemented to protect data and privacy, build trust in e-commerce and ensure cybersecurity through effective digital risk management systems.

Key findings

Since the last assessment, Albania has enhanced its performance in the digital society policy dimension. The economy's score has increased from 2.5 in the 2021 Competitiveness Outlook to 2.7 in the current assessment,[1] with notable progress in enhancing the policy framework with measures that promote digital inclusion and trust in the digital environment. Albania has maintained good performance in the government policies and initiatives to enable network infrastructure investment and broadband services take-up. Albania ranks second in the Western Balkan region, performing better than the regional average, despite the need for stronger implementation (Table 11.1).

Table 11.1. Albania's scores for digital society

Dimension	Sub-dimension	2018 score	2021 score	2024 score	2024 WB6 average
Digital society	10.1: Access			3.2	2.9
	10.2: Use			2.5	2.3
	10.3: Society			2.3	1.7
	10.4: Trust			2.8	2.7
Albania's overall score		**2.9**	**2.5**	**2.7**	**2.5**

Note: Competitiveness Outlook 2021 assessment included one additional sub-dimension entitled "Jobs" that received a 2.0 score.
Source: OECD (2021[1]).

The **key findings** are:

- Albania has incorporated commitments for developing gigabit connectivity in key strategic documents, such as the National Strategy on Development and Integration 2030 and the Digital Agenda 2022-26. While recent regulatory enhancements have reduced costs and administrative burdens, creating a more conducive environment for investments in fixed (fibre) and mobile (5G) network infrastructure, Albania lags behind the WB6 and EU Member States, with 20.9% of fixed broadband subscriptions per 100 inhabitants. Alignment with the EU framework on electronic communications is pending at the time of writing, and 5G spectrum auctions are yet to be conducted.

- With an up-to-date digital government framework in place, Albania is consistently pursuing its government digitalisation. Following adopting a *digital by default* approach, 95% of all public services are currently available on line. Citizens and businesses' engagement in e-government is growing and digital signatures' uptake is increasing, propelled by legislation aligned with the EU Electronic Identification, Authentication and Trust Services (eIDAS) Regulation[2] on e-identification.

- Despite addressing different aspects of digital inclusion policies, Albania faces challenges in the co-ordination and monitoring measures to reduce inequalities. The digital divide in e-government service utilisation is widening, particularly among underprivileged groups lacking digital skills or access to high-speed connectivity, especially after the shutting down of local front desks in May 2022.

- Albania has significantly enhanced the legal framework governing e-business. Initiatives promoting e-commerce are gaining traction, with intensified efforts to create an innovation ecosystem providing financial support and incubation services to SMEs and start-ups, primarily in the information and communications technologies (ICT) sector. However, the impact of implemented programmes remains limited regarding the overall number of beneficiaries.

- The framework for consumer protection in e-commerce requires alignment with current EU legislation on consumer rights, modernising consumer protection rules, particularly in the realm of e-commerce. Albania lacks effective mechanisms for implementing alternative dispute resolution and self-regulation, while it has yet to prioritise the delivery of e-consumer education.
- Albania has enhanced its cybersecurity framework, aligning with the EU *acquis* level faster than the other WB6 economies. However, its national cybersecurity authority faces challenges in ensuring the resilience of Albania's critical information infrastructure in the aftermath of the series of cyberattacks against the Albanian Government in 2022-23.

State of play and key developments

Albania is making significant strides in developing its digital society, experiencing a rapid increase in Internet usage within the 16-74 age group, rising from 79.37% in 2021 to 83.1% in 2023 (INSTAT, 2023[2]). However, it falls short of the EU average of 91.46% in 2023 (Eurostat, 2024[3]). Gender-related usage of the Internet is well balanced and there has been a positive decline in the share of individuals aged 65-74 who never used the Internet, dropping from 37.9% in 2022 to 32.3% in 2023. Nevertheless, it remains considerably higher than the EU average of 21.66%, revealing a substantial risk of digital exclusion for older individuals. Albania faces a digital skills deficit, with only 23.8% of individuals possessing at least the basic skills, contrasting with the 53.92% EU average in 2021 (Eurostat, 2024[4]). Additionally, the economy lags behind in the number of ICT specialists, constituting just 2.6% of employees in 2021, as opposed to 4.5% in EU Member States.

Despite these challenges, the government is actively pursuing further digitalisation of public services, adopting a *digital by default* service delivery model. In 2022, 44.75% of individuals in the 16-74 age group in Albania used the Internet to interact with public authorities, slightly below the OECD average of 51%. However, according to the United Nations E-Government Development Index (EGDI),[3] Albania slipped to the 63rd position (out of 193 countries) in 2022, a slight regression from the 59th position in 2020 (UN, 2022[5]). Although the economy maintained its absolute score around 0.74 between the two assessments, the regional frontrunner, Serbia, surged from 58th place in 2020 to 40th in 2022, leaving Albania 23 places behind in the EGDI rankings. This comparison indicates that while Albania has sustained good performance in e-government development, it has achieved suboptimal speed in implementing relevant policies and reforms.

Sub-dimension 10.1: Access

Albania has substantially enhanced its **broadband infrastructure** since 2021, performing above the regional average in developing high-capacity networks. The government has incorporated ultra-high-speed connectivity targets in key horizontal and sectoral policy documents, such as the National Strategy on Development and Integration 2030, the Digital Agenda 2022-26 and the Economic Reform Programme 2023-25.

Over the past three years, Albania has consistently implemented its National Plan for Sustainable Development of Digital Broadband Infrastructure 2020-25 (National Broadband Plan, NBP), aimed at achieving 100% broadband penetration to households, businesses and public institutions by 2025, with 50% enjoying connectivity speeds of at least 1 Gbps (gigabits per second) in urban areas such as Tirana. Fibre infrastructure, fibre to the premises (FTTP), increased by 12% year-on-year in 2022, contributing to fibre broadband connections reaching 61% of the total broadband connections in 2022. Despite these advancements, a noticeable gap in the penetration of fixed broadband connectivity remains. Albania lags behind the other five WB6 economies, the EU average and OECD average (Figure 11.1) in fixed

broadband penetration. At the end of 2022, the share of subscribers with broadband access from fixed networks was 20.9% per 100 inhabitants (compared to 34.9% in OECD countries), which corresponds to slightly over 80% in household penetration (AKEP, 2022[6]). Furthermore, only 12% of households with fixed Internet subscriptions have access speeds exceeding 100 megabits per second (Mbps) (AKEP, 2023[7]).

Additionally, access inequalities between urban and rural populations persist. In 2022, fixed broadband penetration in rural areas remained as low as 9%, in contrast to 31% in urban areas, which highlights a lack of active government incentives for infrastructure investments in rural settlements. Notably, rural broadband connectivity in Albania heavily relies on mobile networks, which face speed limitations imposed by 4G/3G technology that cannot support gigabit speeds. The commercial deployment of 5G has not yet been launched, awaiting the finalisation of the 5G spectrum allocation process scheduled for 2024. Moreover, Albania has yet to align its existing legislation with the 2023 revised EU Guidelines on State Aid for broadband networks,[4] currently enforced in EU Member States. These guidelines align the threshold for public support to fixed networks with the latest technological and market developments; introduce a new assessment framework for deploying mobile networks (including 5G); and outline simplified rules and compatibility criteria to incentivise adoption of broadband services.

Figure 11.1. Fixed broadband penetration in the WB6 economies, the EU and the OECD (2022)

Percentage of the population with a subscription to fixed broadband
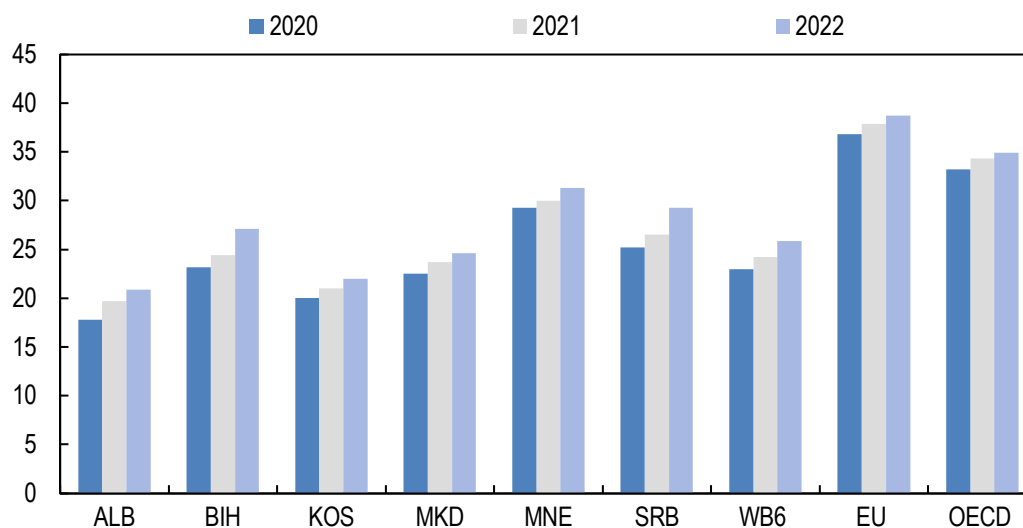
Note: OECD and EU averages are calculated as simple averages.
Sources: Regarding ALB data, information sent by AKEP for the *Competitiveness Outlook* assessment; OECD (2024[8]); International Communications Union (2024[9]).

StatLink 🔗 https://stat.link/1atdbp

Albania has demonstrated a commitment to establishing a robust electronic **communications regulatory framework,** empowering market players to innovate and invest in infrastructure to meet the growing demand for high-quality connectivity, while fostering competition and providing consumer choice. However, the existing legal framework does not yet align with the European Electronic Communications Code (EECC).[5] The government has prepared a new Law on Electronic Communications, which has undergone consultations and subsequent EC review, and is currently anticipated for adoption in early 2024. This legislation is expected to deliver various benefits, including regulatory harmonisation with EU Member

States, reducing complexity for service providers operating in multiple countries, and facilitating cross-border services. The new law promises to improve consumer protection and competition in electronic communications, and to fortify the financial independence of the regulator, the Electronic and Postal Communications Authority (AKEP). The regulator is consistently monitoring the domestic telecommunications market and applying regulatory remedies, according to the existing framework. Moreover, AKEP is committed to the continuous development of the ATLAS system[6], the electronic registry of public electronic communications networks, with comprehensive training on its use conducted across all municipalities in 2022. In a positive development, the regulatory framework was updated in 2022 to streamline administrative procedures and reduce costs associated with investments in fixed and mobile broadband infrastructure development. This update aligns with the EU Broadband Cost Reduction Directive.[7]

Furthermore, Albania stands out as the first economy in the WB region to align with the 2020 EU Connectivity Toolbox Recommendation,[8] amending existing regulations in 2022 to introduce lighter rules for building permissions for small antennas in 5G mobile networks. However, despite these regulatory advances, Albania has not yet conducted 5G spectrum auctions, placing it behind its three neighbouring WB6 economies (Kosovo, Montenegro and North Macedonia); those economies have already awarded 5G licences to operators and commercial 5G deployments have emerged in respective urban centres. Forthcoming adoption of the new law on electronic communications will necessitate additional regulatory adjustments and updates on relevant product and service markets within the electronic communications sector, in line with the 2021 EU Delegated Regulation[9] supplementing the EECC and the 2020 EC Recommendation.[10]

In advancing **data accessibility**, Albania has integrated open data policy measures in its broader national Open Government Partnership (OGP) Action Plan for 2023-25. The economy has strengthened its legal framework for reusing public sector information by enacting the new Open Data Law in April 2023. This legislation enhances the economy's legal alignment with the EU Open Data Directive,[11] underscoring the importance of transparency and fair competition. While the law introduces novel concepts, such as the definition and creation of high-value datasets accessible through Application Programming Interfaces (APIs), their practical implementation is still pending. Achieving full alignment with the EU data framework necessitates further reforms to facilitate data reuse by the public sector and the development of trustworthy data-sharing systems, in accordance with the EU Data Governance Act.[12] The current policy focus is primarily centred on data transparency, with less emphasis on data sharing for innovation.

Currently, the data-driven economy is impeded by a lack of understanding regarding the significance of data openness in the public sector, coupled with limited public awareness of its benefits for citizens and businesses. Efforts to promote data accessibility through campaigns and capacity-building opportunities for both the public and private sectors have been insufficient. Despite relevant obligations for public institutions and support from the National Agency for Information Society, information is not consistently published on public sector websites. To address some of these challenges, Albania has integrated relevant commitments in its OGP action plan. These include streamlining automatic data publishing to the national open data portal and organising public awareness campaigns on the wide range of open data applications. Nevertheless, Albania's Open Data Portal remains underdeveloped. The economy performed below average in the portal and quality dimensions among five EU candidates (4 WB economies and Ukraine) in the 2023 open data readiness assessment of the EU's official open data portal (M. Page, 2023[10]). The national portal offers access to only 91 datasets with one out of four datasets being real-time or dynamic (Albanian Open Portal Data, 2024[11]). While datasets are published according to technical standards, their consistency and timeliness is not regularly reviewed, limiting their reuse potential for developing new services. Additionally, data reuse cases are not highlighted in the portal and data reuse monitoring is not systematically performed, hindering comprehensive assessment of relevant demand for datasets.

Sub-dimension 10.2: Use

Albania has consistently pursued a citizen-centric approach in developing its **digital government** initiatives, yet the inclusiveness of public e-services warrants further attention. Its commitment to the implementation of its Paperless Administration strategy has been further underscored by the adoption of the Digital Agenda 2022-26, which aims to enhance the quality and security of e-government services. The enactment of the new e-government law in May 2023 has brought comprehensive regulations governing the creation and provision of electronic services. Legislation on electronic identification and trust services has aligned fully with the EU eIDAS Regulation on e-identification and the uptake of digital signature services has advanced significantly.[13] However, while digital signature services are available to domestic users, cross-border public services are not yet established. Mutual cross-border recognition of eID systems depends on bilateral agreements, while discussions among WB economies and the EU are under way to establish cross-border interoperability in the region.[14]

Since May 2022, over 1 237 public services, constituting approximately 95% of the total, have transitioned to *digital by default* (i.e. online-only delivery), eliminating the need for physical interaction with public administration employees and eradicating corruption practices, long queues, and dissatisfaction (Jorgoni, 2022[12]). The government's current focus is on implementing a life-event approach[15] within public administration. Plans are under way to redesign existing e-services for citizens and businesses, framing them around life-events, and to re-engineer the e-government portal (e-Albania). Meanwhile, the e-Albania portal continues to witness a steady rise in engagement, boasting approximately 3 million registered users, including citizens and businesses. On a daily basis, the portal serves an average of 410 000 users. Additionally, the government remains committed to fostering communication and interaction with citizens and businesses, aiming to build trust and facilitate equitable resolutions to community or business issues (Box 11.1). The Government Gateway (GG), Albania's public administration interoperability platform, provides real-time interconnection of 60 public administration information systems. This enables automatic completing of around 68% of application forms on the e-Albania portal. Currently, the Government Network (GovNet) connects more than 230 public institutions in Tirana. However, the GovNet is not yet expanded throughout Albania to ensure regional institutions' access to centralised services; fibre infrastructure has yet to reach the entire territory (NAIS, 2023[13]). Despite notable advancements in government digitalisation, Albania has further steps to take to enhance the inclusiveness, quality and personalisation of public e-services, adopting new digital service standards and digital innovations.

Digital business development in Albania has gained momentum over the past three years, largely influenced by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. While legal and policy framework reforms since 2021 have facilitated e-commerce and e-business development, state financial support for the digital transformation of SMEs across sectors remains inadequate. The Law on Electronic Documents, Electronic Identification and Trusted Services laid the groundwork for e-business development, while the Inter-sectorial Business and Investments Development (BID) Strategy 2021-27 integrated initiatives for promoting e-commerce and supporting SMEs' digital transformation to enhance the economy's competitiveness.

Despite these efforts, financial support and mentoring services for digitalisation have primarily relied on donor funding. Programmes like CoSolve-19[16] have assisted approximately 700 SMEs to overcome the negative effects of the pandemic, providing digitalisation grants averaging EUR 7 000 to about 300 SMEs. Another donor-funded initiative, ConnectIT 2.0,[17] allocated similar grants to support the digitalisation of 75 SMEs with a total budget of around EUR 450 000. The government has mobilised the Albanian Investment Development Agency (AIDA) to enhance SMEs' innovative and technological capacities. While AIDA is responsible for organising campaigns and training on adopting e-commerce and e-business practices, the scope of relevant activities has been limited. AIDA's website offers an online guide on starting an e-commerce business and information on financing opportunities for SMEs. AIDA also created an assessment tool to identify the needs of the labour market and to provide adjusted e-commerce and e-business training opportunities, but the implementation of training programmes remains pending.

Box 11.1. "The Albania We Want" co-government portal

"The Albania We Want" (www.shqiperiaqeduam.al) is an open platform for communication and interaction with citizens, which aims to serve as a tool for listening to citizens in real time regarding current political and governance issues – discussing important reforms and measures; enabling citizens to influence government policies in every sector or the progress of work in ministries and state institutions; facilitating active participation in the fight against corruption; and promoting fair solutions to community or personal issues.

The portal aims to provide a practical tool for co-governance, promoting a politically agnostic vision of policy making to create a state for all citizens regardless of their political beliefs. The portal provides space for citizens to express their critical stance on reforms, projects or governance issues, or to report abusive or unethical behaviour by state officials. It also allows businesses to submit complaints about the business climate, government policies or interactions with public administration. Citizens and businesses can submit evidence or even video material to support their complaints.

Complaints received through the platform are treated by the Agency for Dialogue and Co-Governance, which reports directly to the prime minister. The Law on co-governance, adopted in November 2021, gives substantial powers on mediation and dealing with grievances to the agency, which was reorganised by a government decision in 2022. There is evidence that complaints and issues reported on the portal have been resolved for the benefit of citizens, although some concerns remain on whether the agency's role may discourage the use of more formal and independent appeal and complaint channels.

Sources: Government of the Republic of Albania (2024[14]); European Commission (2023[15]).

Challenges persist in reporting and conducting impact assessments on implemented activities. Only in December 2023, the government approved the establishment of an interministerial working group to monitor the BID Strategy and its Action Plan, highlighting the need for a more systematic approach to implementing monitoring. Nevertheless, the 2023 ICT survey on enterprises by the Albanian Institute of Statistics indicates a growing adoption of e-commerce, with 14.8% of SMEs engaging in online sales (INSTAT, 2023[16]). However, this figure still lags behind the EU average of 22.9% (Eurostat, 2024[17])..While 99.1% of businesses have computers with Internet access in 2023, only 54.9% maintain a business website, compared to an EU average of 78.1%. The survey also indicated that 80.5% of businesses with Internet access use social media to promote business services or products, but there is underutilisation of cloud computing services (22.9% against the EU average of 45.2%).

Meanwhile, government initiatives supporting SMEs' technological innovation have gained momentum in the past three years. The initiatives support enterprise innovation and internationalisation across sectors, but not the specific growth needs of the ICT industry. There is a lack of programmes for hiring skilled ICT professionals and investing in ICT standardisation.

Since adopting the law on start-ups in 2022, Albania has fostered initiatives for developing scientific and technology parks and a start-up ecosystem. Highlighted programmes include the TechSpace, created by the National Agency of Information Society, and the Technology and Economic Development Area (TEDA) in Tirana, aimed to attract investments and support the internationalisation of companies, focusing on the ICT industry among other targeted sectors. AIDA is pivotal in managing state funds designed to support SMEs in their growth and innovation endeavours. These include the Competitiveness Fund, the Innovation Fund, the Creative Economy Fund, and the Start-Up Fund. In 2022, the Start-up Fund allocated EUR 2.5 million in financial support to 58 innovative start-ups, with 39% (or 29 companies) operating in

the ICT sector, to purchase equipment, renovate technology and buy software. Additionally, the Minister of State for the Protection of Entrepreneurship published calls for ICT start-ups and innovations in late 2022; others were published by the donor-funded Challenge Fund[18] in late 2023, with implementation pending in 2024.

Horizontal monitoring and impact assessment of various government and donor-funded initiatives fostering innovation and digitalisation of SMEs have been unsatisfactory thus far. To address this deficiency, the government established a new state agency in July 2023, Startup Albania. The purpose of this agency is to ensure the proper functioning of the start-up ecosystem. Planned initiatives under the Digital Agenda Strategy for 2024 and 2025 include programmes supporting start-ups and attracting digital nomads to Albania by introducing the e-residency concept. In implementing this concept, Albania could draw inspiration from successful practices observed in countries like Estonia (Box 11.2).

Box 11.2. "e-Residency" in Estonia

Estonia is the first country to offer e-Residency, a government-issued digital identity and status that provides access to Estonia's e-services and transparent business environment. E-Residency provides the key for a growing global community to access Estonia's digital nation.

Estonian e-Residency enables digital entrepreneurs to establish and manage an EU-based company completely online, from anywhere in the world. Estonia launched its highly popular e-Residency programme, the first of its kind, back in 2014. Thus far, more than 103 000 people from 170+ countries have applied for e-Residency, establishing over 25 000 Estonian companies. Estonia is a near-cashless society, with over 99% of financial transactions happening digitally. Estonia developed the X-Road, its proprietary decentralised, distributed system, in 2001 and has utilised Blockchain since 2008.

E-Residency's ambitious mission is to facilitate and advance the provision of Estonia's unique digital services, empower entrepreneurs, and transform business practices globally. The programme is a government-wide initiative led by the e-Residency team, the Estonian Police and Border Guard Board, and several government ministries dedicated to constantly improving Estonia's digital infrastructure and business environment.

Since 21 June 2021 foreigners have been able to apply for e-resident status also in Lithuania, to receive an e-resident card and e-ID certificate. This allows them to use the electronic administrative, public or commercial services provided in Lithuania.

Source: Government of the Republic of Estonia (2024[18]).

Albania currently lacks formulated policies to govern the development and use of **emerging digital technologies** such as artificial intelligence, Blockchain, or the Internet of Things (IoT). However, the Digital Agenda strategy advocates for using such technologies to enhance the quality of e-services provided to citizens and businesses. Likewise, the Law on e-Government adopted in June 2023 enables the use of artificial intelligence technology in e-government information systems, pending a decision of the Council of Ministers on the methodology and technical standards for its use. The government has initiated a process for drafting an artificial intelligence strategy that is anticipated by the end of 2024 to ensure the responsible use of this technology, focusing on its safe and socially beneficial development. The National Agency of Information Society (NAIS) introduced the first version of the virtual assistant in the e-Albania portal on 28 December 2023, receiving 22 000 questions from the portal's users in the first two days. It is currently integrated as a chatbot, designed to offer information and assistance to citizens regarding the use of public e-services, while its voice-based version is under development.

The government plans to use AI in the process of legislative alignment with the EU *acquis*, analysing Albanian legislation, comparing it to EU legislation and assisting in the work of legal approximation experts. Moreover, plans are under way for integrating AI and machine learning in public procurement procedures and in preventing and detecting fiscal evasion and financial crime. Considerations include the exploitation of AI and IoT technologies in agriculture to enhance yields, and in the judicial system to contribute in decision-making processes. These government initiatives for integrating emerging technologies in public service create an even more pressing need to adopt policies and adapt the legal framework to ensure such technologies' beneficial and safe use.

Sub-dimension 10.3: Society

Albania has enhanced the policy framework with measures that promote **digital inclusion** since 2021, but tangible progress from implemented initiatives remains limited. The Digital Agenda Strategy 2022-26 allocates EUR 49 million for the development of digital skills, and additional funds for the adaptation of the e-government portal and public sector websites for persons with disabilities. However, these Digital Agenda initiatives will be implemented through the donor-funded GovTech[19] programme. As of February 2024 the implementation of GovTech is still pending, with planned activities extending until 2027. Albania has not yet adopted legal obligations for accessibility in public sector websites and e-services and accessibility requirements in the procurement processes of ICT products and services. The government's 2024 work plan incorporates the development of updated legislation on e-accessibility, aligning with the EU *acquis* and international standards, with an anticipated adoption by the end of that year. Meanwhile, since adoption of the National Plan for Persons with Disabilities 2021-25, NAIS has collaborated with the Ministry of Health and Social Protection to redesign public institution websites for accessibility. The activity was initiated in 2022; NAIS has so far reported limited progress, mainly through improvements made to ministry websites (NAIS, 2023[13]).

The risk of digital exclusion is exacerbated by the *digital by default* service delivery model. Since May 2022, the government closed down the local "front desks" delivering national administrative services, enacting its plan for the transfer of all public services on line (EC, 2022[19]). This abrupt shift has widened the gap in digital government service utilisation, particularly affecting population segments with limited digital skills, such as the Roma and Egyptian communities, the elderly, and those with limited access to affordable high-speed broadband connectivity. Recognising this gap, businesses in Albania have stepped in to support those struggling with e-services. Unfortunately, without alternatives, digitally illiterate individuals are compelled to pay for assistance in accessing public administration e-services that are otherwise free of charge. This creates a financial barrier for certain groups, necessitating strong government action to provide local support centres and widespread digital skills training for all underprivileged groups. While the launch of the virtual assistant in the e-Albania portal in December 2023 adds value, it cannot replace the recommended omni-channel approach, as proposed by OECD good practice recommendations. These recommendations promote a more inclusive digital transformation, allowing online and mobile services to coexist with face-to-face or over-the-phone service delivery, ensuring that underlying processes are digitally coherent and integrated (OECD, 2020[20]).

Positively, the GovTech programme promises to enhance digital inclusiveness in e-government services. Programme commitments include creating the e-Albania Omni-channel Contact Centre, complemented by local info-points for additional assistance. The government is also planning the establishment of 10 Youth Innovation Centres (YIC) across the economy to support digitally marginalised groups. YICs will function as comprehensive hubs, offering access to various e-services and providing inclusive digital skills training. Another positive development is the Job Office Digitalisation programme, implementing assistive technology with hardware, software and special devices and catering to various needs, including advanced screen-reading technology for the visually impaired and portable computers with built-in Braille systems (AKEP, 2023[7]).

Albania has not yet formulated a dedicated policy for ensuring a **green digital sector** and harnessing its benefits for the green transition. Nevertheless, the National Plan for Sustainable Development of Digital Broadband Infrastructure 2020-25 (NBP) is the first policy document to recognise digital technologies' environmental impact, particularly in electronic communications systems and networks. The NBP introduces measures to make telecommunications networks more environmentally friendly, incorporating sustainable energy technologies such as solar energy installations at remote telecom stations. Additionally, it addresses the issue of environmental pollution caused by the disposal of electronic equipment, commonly known as e-waste. While existing legislation on waste from electrical and electronic equipment (2012) outlines basic relevant obligations, the government is preparing new legislation on e-waste, expected to be finalised in 2025. This new law will outline extended responsibilities for producers in the post-consumer phase, specifically referring to three categories of waste, including e-waste.

NAIS is at the forefront of efforts to co-ordinate the process of electronic and electrical waste in compliance with provisions of the law on integrated waste management. The agency is also implementing the GoGreen project, a co-funded initiative under the IPA Programme, designed to enhance the energy efficiency of the government data centre. According to Eurostat (Eurostat, 2022[21]) in 2022, 41% of enterprises in Albania applied some measures affecting the energy consumption of ICT equipment, marking the second highest rate in the WB region and closely following the EU average of 44.1%. Despite the advancement of digitalisation in both the public and private sectors, public awareness regarding the negative environmental impact of the digital sector remains limited. Initiating public campaigns could play a pivotal role in promoting measures to mitigate environmental impacts, reduce energy consumption, and advocate for sustainable practices.

Sub-dimension 10.4: Trust

Albania has actively implemented its existing legal framework on **privacy and personal data protection**, consistently working towards alignment with the EU *acquis*. Yet implementing this framework would require enhanced capacity, especially in human resources. While the legal framework on e-privacy adheres to current EU legislation, the personal data protection framework is still in the process of alignment with the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).[20] Oversight of the framework's implementation falls under the responsibilities of the Information and Data Protection Commissioner Office (IDP), an independent authority currently staffed by 60 employees, both for the protection of personal data and the right to access public information. The IDP has already drafted 13 sub-legal acts to complement the new Albanian Law on Personal Data Protection (PDP) and facilitate its implementation in practice. Its Institutional Strategy 2022-25, coupled with annual Work Plans, outlines a vision for enhancing personal data protection and e-privacy in Albania. Emphasis is placed on collaboration with international counterparts, increased training opportunities, and awareness initiatives for the public and data protection practitioners. However, the IDP faces challenges due to budgetary restrictions, limiting its capacity to implement this vision fully. An analysis of the domestic situation in personal data protection in 2022 reveals a persistent weakness in how public and private sector controllers fulfil their obligations and functions (IDP, 2022[22]). The IDP's 2022 annual report notes an increasing trend in citizens' complaints over the past three years. This shift can be attributed to enhanced awareness of citizens about their rights, and support provided by the IDP in exercising them. Despite not being consistently consulted by government institutions during policy or legislation design processes, the IDP contributed legal opinions on 27 draft legal acts in 2022. It nevertheless anticipates challenges in meeting the requirements of the forthcoming adoption of the PDP law, compounded by the growing digitalisation of systems and services in Albania. Addressing these challenges will necessitate significant staff-capacity building and practitioners' training. Additional

capacities are also essential to tackle priorities relating to emerging technologies linked to digitalisation, such as biometrics, genetic data, and video/audio surveillance.

Albania currently lacks a comprehensive policy or programme for **consumer protection in e-commerce**, signalling a need for modernisation of the legal framework and an intensified focus on consumer education. Recognising this gap, the government has engaged in a multi-stakeholder process to formulate a new Consumer Protection strategy, with adoption anticipated for 2024. The existing legal framework for consumer protection is outdated,[21] but plans to align it with the EU framework, enhancing enforcement and modernising consumer protection rules for e-commerce, are set for 2025. The current framework requires improvements in mechanisms for alternative dispute resolution, as only some form of arbitration is currently foreseen. Additionally, it lacks provisions for self-regulation and adequate sanctions and remedies to effectively protect online consumers' rights.

Meanwhile, the Internal Market Department of the Ministry of Finance and Economy (MFE) has implemented a monitoring initiative of online traders' websites on legal compliance (so-called website screening or "Sweeps"). The screening of 92 business websites or social network accounts offering distance contracts or online shopping services yielded valuable results, informing the development of the Action Plan for Electronic Commerce 2023-26, pending adoption in early 2024. The Action Plan outlines legislative updates to regulate e-commerce and relevant consumer protection in line with the EU *acquis*; development of a harmonised regime for mutual recognition of electronic signatures in judicial proceedings; membership in an international dispute resolution platform; and adoption of updated privacy rules. While the MFE is tasked with raising awareness about consumer rights and how to exercise them, including e-commerce transactions, current efforts are insufficient to create a tangible impact. An information leaflet detailing rules and obligations for both consumers and traders in distance and off-premises contracts is available on the Consumer Protection Commission's website, but awareness-raising campaigns for online consumers are not actively pursued. The forthcoming e-commerce action plan aims to strengthen awareness campaigns in co-operation with the AIDA.

The Albanian Government has prioritised enhanced **cybersecurity** measures following the mid-July 2022 cyberattack on Albanian government services. The National Authority for Electronic Certification and Cyber Security (AKCESK)[22], which incorporates the National Cybersecurity Incident Response Team (AL-CIRT), has undertaken activities to comply with advanced cybersecurity standards, intensifying efforts to address escalating challenges and strengthening national cyber-defence capacities. AKCESK has increased public awareness raising and staff training initiatives to elevate cybersecurity levels, expanding the list of Critical Information Infrastructures (CIIs) subject to audits for implementing minimum-security measures[23]. Despite continuous growth in the capacities of AKCESK personnel and public/private security experts safeguarding CIIs, alongside ongoing investments in technology, a subsequent cyberattack on the National Assembly of the Republic of Albania and telecom company One Albania on 25 December 2023 underscored the need for a reassessment and further fortification of the national cybersecurity strategy (AKCESK, 2023[23]).

As the key institution in implementing the National Cybersecurity Strategy 2020-25, AKCESK is currently formulating a new Action Plan for 2024-25. The Strategy's 2021 monitoring report revealed that 52% of planned activities (65 in total) were fully realised in the first year (AKCESK, 2022[24]). However, despite a decision in 2023 to increase the national authority's staff to 85, the current number of employees remains at 50 by year-end. The government has yet to develop a strategic approach to cybersecurity capacity building in the public sector to strengthen the economy's overall cyber resilience. In a positive development, the government prioritised the establishment of the Government Cyber Security Centre within NAIS in 2023, which was outlined by the Digital Agenda. Additionally, enhancement of the existing cybersecurity law, largely aligned with the EU NIS Directive,[24] is under way. The new law on cybersecurity, approved by the Council of Ministers in January 2024 and pending adoption by the National Assembly at the time of writing, improves legal alignment with the NIS2 Directive,[25] the EU-wide legislation on cybersecurity since 2023. The new law also governs certification for ICT products, services and processes in accordance with

the EU Cybersecurity Act.[26] While there are currently no cybersecurity requirements for public procurements of ICT products and services, nor a qualifications framework for the recruitment of cybersecurity professionals, the Strategy's 2024-25 Action Plan has foreseen the development of a National Cyber Security Certification Scheme. This initiative is an important step in strengthening the overall cybersecurity infrastructure in Albania.

Overview of implementation of Competitiveness Outlook 2021 recommendations

Albania's progress on implementing CO 2021 Recommendations has been mixed: the economy has made strong advances in business digitalisation, while moderate improvements were made in areas like data openness or rural connectivity. Conversely, progress has stagnated in domains such as digital inclusion and consumer protection in e-commerce. Table 11.2 shows the economy's progress in implementing past recommendations for developing a digital society.

Table 11.2. Albania's progress on past recommendations for digital society policy

Competitiveness Outlook 2021 recommendations	Progress status	Level of progress
Accelerate adoption of open data and data reuse legislation and strengthen the demand for open data innovation through inclusive co-creation processes	The government made progress by adopting the new Law on Open Data and the Reuse of Public Sector Information in April 2023, aligning with the EU Open Data Directive. However, the number of published datasets on the Open Data portal is limited, and few are real-time or dynamic. Public awareness and public sector capacity-building opportunities on data reuse and data innovation concepts are insufficient.	Moderate
Improve the legal framework on e-commerce and e-business and promote private sector ICT adoption through financial support programmes	The legal framework on e-signatures and e-business was improved in 2021. The National Agency of Information Society (NAIS) promotes digital signature services, enabling e-business. Implementation of the Business and Investments Development Strategy 2021-27 has started with programmes supporting SME digitalisation across sectors and e-commerce development. The Albanian Investment Development Agency (AIDA) is implementing awareness raising and training activities on e-commerce. However, the number of SME beneficiaries and trainees so far remains below expectations. The Startup Fund provides financial support for technological equipment and software to innovative start-ups.	Strong
Provide adequate public investment for developing the digital skills of students and adults, in parallel with increasing Internet connectivity and ICT for schools	While the National Broadband Development Plan 2020-25 is being implemented with minor delays, the Digital Agenda Strategy Gigabit Society established more ambitious gigabit society targets. While Internet connectivity in schools has increased, fibre networks delivering high-speed broadband services have not yet covered all rural settlements. The Digital Agenda 2022-26 strategy prioritises digital education and digital skills development, but the implementation of relevant activities is integrated in the pending donor-funded GovTech programme.	Moderate
Adopt accessibility requirements in public procurement of ICT products and services and create corresponding certification schemes	The government has not made progress in adopting accessibility requirements for ICT products and services in public procurement processes, and a cybersecurity certification scheme has not been adopted. Positively, the new cybersecurity law pending adoption in early 2024 governs certification for ICT products, services and processes in alignment with the EU Cybersecurity Act.	Limited
Design a programme for consumer protection in e-commerce that realistically promotes consumers' education or guidance and builds trust in e-commerce	There is currently no policy or programme on consumer protection in e-commerce. However, the Consumer Protection Commission's website has published an information leaflet describing rules on consumer rights and traders' obligations in distance and off-premises contracts. The legal framework on consumer protection in e-commerce does not align with the EU *acquis*. An Action Plan for Electronic Commerce 2023-26 is pending adoption in early 2024.	Limited

Note: Digital skills assessment is not part of the Digital Society Dimension in CO 2024 and is now part of Education and Employment Policy.

The way forward for digital society

Considering the previous recommendations' implementation level, there are still areas in which Albania could enhance the digital society policy framework. As such, policy makers may wish to:

- **Complete the legal alignment with the European Electronic Communications Code (EECC) and incentivise investments in ultra-high-speed networks development.** Following the adoption of the new law in 2024, the government needs to expedite regulatory adjustments and promptly conduct 5G spectrum auctions. The government holds an important role in encouraging investments in 5G and fibre network rollouts and developing public awareness campaigns informing the Albanian public about the benefits of 5G. It is important to develop and fund an ambitious fibre infrastructure development plan, particularly in "white areas",[27] and ensure fair sharing of fibre infrastructure. The government should prioritise regulatory and administrative streamlining measures for 5G operators, enhancing their capacity to implement the required infrastructure rapidly.

- **Identify high-value datasets and ensure their automated, timely and consistent publication while promoting data-driven innovation.** The government needs to intensify law enforcement on data reuse by defining high-value datasets and adopting regulations that delineate data intermediary services for trustworthy data sharing and pooling. Awareness-raising campaigns should be supported to highlight the benefits of open data reuse and sharing through successful use-case promotion. The TechSpace initiative could be further mobilised as a hub for data-driven innovation, encouraging the development of data-driven public-private partnerships and the creation of new services.

- **Ensure an omni-channel approach in providing public services and prioritise the implementation of e-accessibility obligations by all state institutions to reduce inequalities.** The government needs to take measures to ensure inclusiveness for all underprivileged groups, accelerating the establishment of the planned Omnichannel Contact Centre and Youth Innovation Centres. However, since these efforts may not be sufficient for the entire territory, the government should provide practical support to citizens struggling to use e-services through phone lines and local support centres in rural settlements, possibly considering the example of Portugal's Citizen Spots (Box 11.3) to ensure that no one is left behind. It is important to expedite the planned adoption and swift implementation of e-accessibility standards to align with relevant EU legislation for e-accessibility in public sector websites,[28] and to ensure that the e-Albania portal is equally accessible to citizens with disabilities.

Box 11.3. Citizen Spots (Portugal)

In order to advance the multichannel delivery of public services in Portugal, the government has prioritised the development of small and integrated one-stop-shops, which provide central and local administration services as well as those of utility providers (e.g. electricity, telecommunications). These counters, managed by public officials, assist citizens in accessing online public services. Developed in partnership with municipal governments and the main national postal company, the network of Citizen Spots allows the Portuguese Government to reach segments of the population that lack access to the Internet or the necessary skills to use online services. At a relatively small investment, the network also covers remote areas where face-to-face delivery of public services would otherwise pose a financial challenge.

Source: OECD (2020[25]).

- **Improve alignment of the consumer protection framework with the EU *acquis* and enhance e-consumers' education.** The government should advance alignment with the EU Consumer Rights Directive[29] in 2024 to align with EU's modernised consumer protection rules in e-commerce and to facilitate their enhanced enforcement. Attention should be drawn to establishing effective self-regulation, redress and dispute resolution mechanisms, and adjusting sanctions and remedies to increase effectiveness. The government should empower e-commerce consumers by providing access to practical consumer education, information and advice on how to file complaints and access alternative dispute resolution mechanisms.

- **Develop a cybersecurity framework for procuring and verifying ICT products and services in line with internationally recognised cybersecurity standards.** Following the adoption of the new law on cybersecurity in 2024, the government needs to adopt a National Cybersecurity Certification Scheme for ICT products and services and enforce corresponding requirements in public procurement procedures to ensure a stronger cybersecurity system in Albania. The government should develop a 5G certification scheme, integrating ENISA's recommendations within the framework defined in the EU Cybersecurity Act and the EU 5G Cybersecurity Toolbox.

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Notes

[1] The scores from the 2018 assessment are not directly comparable due to the significant restructuring of the digital society policy assessment framework, while even maintained scores between the 2021 and current assessment may reflect a slightly improved performance, considering updated thresholds and new qualitative indicators included in the 2024 assessment framework.

[2] Regulation (EU) 2014/910 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 July 2014 on electronic identification and trust services for electronic transactions in the internal market, repealing Directive 1999/93/EC, http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2014/910/oj.

[3] The EGDI is a composite measure of three important dimensions of e-government, namely provision of online services, telecommunication connectivity, and human capacity.

[4] Communication from the Commission Guidelines on State Aid for Broadband Networks 2023/C 36/01, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A52023XC0131%2801%29.

[5] Directive (EU) 2018/1972 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2018 establishing the European Electronic Communications Code (Recast) (Text with EEA relevance), http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/2018/1972/oj.

[6] The ATLAS system is available via the following link: https://atlas.akep.al/smartPortal/AKEP.

[7] Directive (EU) 2014/61 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 May 2014 on measures to reduce the cost of deploying high-speed electronic communications networks (Text with EEA relevance), https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2014/61.

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[9] Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) 2021/654 of 18 December 2020 supplementing Directive (EU) 2018/1972 of the European Parliament and of the Council by setting a single maximum Union-wide mobile voice termination rate and a single maximum Union-wide fixed voice termination rate (Text with EEA relevance), http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg_del/2021/654/oj.

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[11] Directive (EU) 2019/1024 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on open data and the reuse of public sector information (recast), http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/2019/1024/oj.

[12] Regulation (EU) 2022/868 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 30 May 2022 on European data governance and amending Regulation (EU) 2018/1724 (Data Governance Act) (Text with EEA relevance), http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2022/868/oj.

[13] During 2023, the National Agency for Information Society, as a Qualified Provider of Trusted Services, has generated 1 600 electronic seals for public institutions as well as 148 654 qualified certificates for electronic signature.

[14] A Memorandum of Understanding on Regional Interoperability and Trust Services in the Western Balkan Region was signed in Tirana on 2 November 2020 during the WB Digital Summit. Albania is collaborating with the EU and the other WB economies in enhancing interoperability and trust services in the region.

[15] The life-event approach in the context of digital public services delivery refers to a user-centric approach that organises and delivers government services based on major life events or significant milestones in an individual's life. This approach is designed to make government services more accessible, user-friendly, and tailored to the specific needs of individuals at different stages of their lives.

[16] https://cosolve19.al.

[17] https://euforinnovation.al/connectit.

[18] https://challengefund.euforinnovation.al.

[19] The World Bank is financing the GovTech programme for improving equitable access to high-standard public services with USD 65 million, with its implementation spanning across four years until 2027. The programme aims to support the Albanian Government in its efforts to upgrade the e-Albania online portal and mobile application to become more user-centric, more user-friendly, and more accessible to all groups, including the disabled. Among other objectives, GovTech will underpin the portal's transition to enable personalised and proactive services organised by life events; support building the digital and foundational skills of the population; and integrate means to ensure that individuals who require dedicated assistance because they lack digital literacy, information and stable access to ICT devices and connectivity can easily access digital services. https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099250001092351699/pdf/P17784500b2e5f0e093500f87faffa866c.pdf.

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[21] The existing consumer protection law in Albania is aligned with the Consumer Rights Directive (2011/8/EU) that was amended by the newer Directive (EU) 2019/2161.

[22] Upon the entry into force of the new law nr.25/2024 "On Cyber Security" transposing NIS2 Directive, the name has changed to National Cyber Security Authority.

[23] During 2023, 250 individuals from 60 operators of critical and important information infrastructures were trained in the activities organized by AKCESK.

[24] Directive (EU) 2016/1148 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 6 July 2016 concerning measures for a high common level of security of network and information systems across the Union, http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/2016/1148/oj.

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[26] Regulation (EU) 2019/881 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 April 2019 on ENISA (the European Union Agency for Cybersecurity) and on information and communications technology cybersecurity certification and repealing Regulation (EU) No 526/2013 (Cybersecurity Act) (Text with EEA relevance), http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2019/881/oj.

[27] "White areas" are regions characterised by the absence of high-capacity broadband infrastructure, commonly found in remote or rural locations. These areas face limited commercial interest from telecommunications operators, resulting in a lack of network investments.

[28] Directive (EU) 2016/2102 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 October 2016 on the accessibility of the websites and mobile applications of public sector bodies (Text with EEA relevance), http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/2016/2102/oj.

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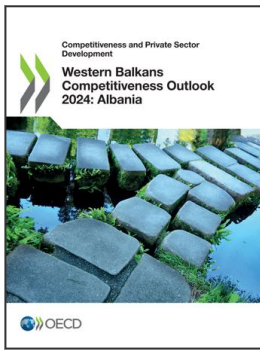
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